That psychology determined the very unusual intensity of the response to *The Closing of the American Mind,* focusing on my alleged elitism. I was suspect as an enemy of our democratic regime. And the first and loudest voices in this chorus came from the Ivy League, particularly from those with some connection to Harvard—to the point where I thought of the old joke about the farmer who hears a thief in the chicken coop. Substituting the Harvard Coop, I imagined myself yelling, "Who's in there?" and getting the answer, "There's nobody in here but us antielitists." Everybody knows that Harvard is in every respect—its students, its faculty, its library, and its endowment—the best university in the world. Long ago when I, a Middle-Westerner, taught for a year at Yale, I was amazed at the little Harvard worm that was eating away at the souls of practically all the professors and students there, except for the ones who had turned down the opportunity to be at Harvard. *Elite* is not a word I care for very much—imprecise and smacking of sociological abstraction—but if any American institution of any kind merits that name, it is Harvard, and it lends that tincture to everyone associated with it.

Why, then, this passion to accuse others of the crime of elitism? One is tempted to attribute it to simple self-protectiveness. "If we say he is one, they won't notice us." But I suspect some, or many, acted from a more tortuous, more ambiguous motive: guilt. The leading principle of our regime is the equal worth of all persons, and facts or sentiments that appear to contradict that principle are experienced by a democrat as immoral. Bad conscience accompanies the democrat who finds himself part of an elite. He tries to suppress or deny to himself whatever covert feelings he might experience—I am sure that none of you has had them—of delight or superiority in the fact that he has been distinguished by Harvard, of how much better off he or she is than the poor jerks at Kalamazoo College, even that he or she deserves it, that superior gifts merit superior education, position, and esteem. A few might consciously believe such things, but since they would be at odds with the egalitarian opinions of democracy, they tend to become spiritual outlaws, hypocrites, and cynically indifferent to the only American principle of justice. The rest, to soothe their consciences, have to engage in casuistry, not to say sophistry. The simple democratic answer would be open admissions, just as there would be if Harvard were located in Europe, where such elitism is less tolerated. But nobody here really considers that. Harvard, I gather, intends to remain adamantly exclusive, implying thereby that there are significant natural differences among human beings. President Bok's way of squaring such elitism with democratic right-thinking is, apparently, to teach that the Harvard person is a doer of good works for society as a whole. This is in the spirit of Harvard's John Rawls, who permits people to possess and cultivate superior talents if they can be proved to benefit the most disadvantaged part of society. Whether this solution is reason or rationalization is open to discussion.

All this suggests the intricate psychology of the democrat, which we must be aware of in order to know ourselves and which we are not likely to be aware of without the help of significant thinkers like Tocqueville, Burke, and Plato, who see us from the outside and judge us in terms of serious alternatives to democracy. The charge of elitism reflects the moral temper of our regime, as the charge of atheism would have done in an earlier age. You couldn't get much of a response in a university today by saying that Allan Bloom doesn't believe in God. But you can get a lot of people worked up by saying that I don't believe in equality. And this tells us a lot about our times, and explains how tempting a career is offered to egalitarian Tartufferie. "Elitist" is not a very precise charge; but compared with the Ivy League, I would have at worst to be called a moderate elitist, and by persons other than those who are now making the charge.

The real disagreement concerns the content of today's and tomorrow's elite education. We are now witnessing the introduction of a new "nonelitist," "nonexclusionary" curriculum in the humanities and in parts of the social sciences, and with it a program for reforming the human understanding. This is an extremely radical project whose supporters pass it off as mainstream by marching under the colors of all the movements toward a more equal society which almost all Americans endorse. Not recognized for what it is, this radicalism can thus marshal powerful and sometimes angry passions alongside its own fanatic ones. *The Closing of the American Mind* was brought before this inquisition and condemned to banishment from the land of the learned. The American Council of Learned Societies even issued a report written by a panel of the new men and women which declared that there is now a scholarly consensus, nay, a proof, that all classic texts must be studied using a single approved method. Such texts are, we are ordered to believe, expressions of the unconscious class, gender, or race prejudices of their authors. The calling of the humanities in our day is to liberate us from the sway of those authors and their prejudices; Shakespeare and Milton, among others, are mentioned in the report. This puts humanists at the cutting edge of the battle against Eurocentrism. The battle is not primarily, or even at all, scholarly but moral and political, and members of the reactionary rear guard are the objects of special fury, the enemies of historic destiny. What kind of a man could stand in the way of deconstructionism, which according to Hillis Miller, one of its proponents, will bring the millennium of peace and justice to all mankind? Consequently the report deplored the "disturbing" success of *The Closing of the American Mind* and attributed it to that old bogey, "American anti-intellectualism" (of the Know-Nothing or McCarthyite variety, you see). The characters who wrote this report were sent by central casting for the movie version of *The Closing of the American Mind.*

Such responses were inevitable, since I am very much a critic of the radical reform being imposed on us, although I have always been a supporter and a beneficiary of the movements toward practical equality.

For my sins I have reaped an unabating whirlwind of abuse, paralleled in my experience only by Sartre's diatribes against his enemies and critics in *Les Temps Modernes* in the forties and fifties. (As I argued in my book, that Sartrean world was the conveyer belt for many of the views affecting us now.) I suspect that Sartre is the model for *engagé* critics who charged that my opinions stain my hands with the blood of innocents in Nicaragua, *les mains sales,* and called me, in a striking reminder of our McCarthyite heritage, "un-American."

People's angers teach much about what concerns them. Anger almost always disguises itself as moral indignation and, as Aristotle teaches, is the only one of the passions that requires speech and reason—to provide arguments which justify it and without which it is frustrated and withers. Anger proves man's rationality while it obscures and endangers reason. The arguments it adduces always lead back to a general principle of morality and then issue in blame—they would also lead to book-burning if the angry were not strongly constrained by our liberal society. Here is an example as reported by Richard Bernstein in *The New York Times* (September 25, 1988):

> A "MINUTE OF HATRED" IN CHAPEL HILL:
> ACADEMIA'S LIBERALS DEFEND THEIR CARNIVAL OF CANONS
> AGAINST BLOOM'S "KILLER B'S"
>
> In some respects, the scenes in North Carolina last weekend recalled the daily "minute of hatred" in George Orwell's *1984*, when citizens are required to rise and hurl invective at pictures of a man known only as Goldstein, the Great Enemy of the state.
>
> At a conference on the future of liberal education sponsored by Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, speaker after speaker denounced what they called "the cultural conservatives" who, in the words

> of a Duke English professor, Stanley Fish, have mounted "dyspeptic attacks on the humanities."
>
> There were no pictures of these "cultural conservatives" on the wall, but they were derided, scorned, laughed at. . . .

I appreciate the *Times*' making explicit the resemblance to Stalinist thought control. Such sentiments represent the current establishment in the humanities, literature, and history. These professors are from hot institutions like Stanford and Duke which have most openly dedicated themselves to the new educational dawn called *openness*, a dawn whose rosy fingers are currently wrapped tightly around the throat of the curriculum in most universities.

The attack on *The Closing of the American Mind* brings this movement into focus, though it has misrepresented both the book and me. There is a desire to make me into something other than what I am so that I can be more easily categorized and demolished. In the first place I am not a conservative—neo- or paleo-. I say this not to curry favor in a setting where conservatism is out of favor. Conservatism is a respectable outlook, and its adherents usually have to have some firmness of character to stick by what is so unpopular in universities. I just do not happen to be that animal. Any superficial reading of my book will show that I differ from both theoretical and practical conservative positions. My teachers—Socrates, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche—could hardly be called conservatives. All foundings are radical, and conservatism always has to be judged by the radical thought or events it intends to conserve. At first I was not, to use Marxist language, even considered an objective ally of the Right—as the very favorable opinions of the book expressed by Left liberals such as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, Richard Reeves, Robert Skidelsky, and Conor Cruise O'Brien prove. But that was before the elite intellectuals weighed in. Their misunderstanding has something to do with the fact that I am also not in any current sense a liberal, although the preservation of liberal society is of central concern to me. The permanent human tendency is to doubt that the theoretical stance is authentic and suspect that it is only a covert attachment to a party. And this tendency is much strengthened in our time when philosophy is itself understood to be *engagé*, the most extreme partisanship. The necessity of parties in politics has been extrapolated to the point where it now seems that the mind itself must be dominated by the spirit of party. From this perspective, theory looks pallid, weak, dishonest, and sinister.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., criticized me in a way which shows how naïve the views of contemporary intellectuals have become. He said, with a somewhat unsure grasp of what I wrote, that I am an absolutist whereas the authentic American tradition is relativist. To support this latter contention he cited—hold on to your seats—the Declaration of Independence's "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . ." He takes this statement of fundamental principle, *mirabile dictu,* to be evidence of the American Founders' relativism. Schlesinger made this astounding argument in a commencement address at Brown University, where he apparently thinks the students will believe anything.

It is a waste of time to defend myself when the charges allege that I said things I did not say, but it is perhaps useful to instruct Professor Schlesinger about the real question. I never stated, nor do I believe, that man is, or can be, in possession of absolutes. My language is not that of absolutes, a language not present in my writings. I tried to teach, evidently not very successfully in his case, that there are two threats to reason, the opinion that one knows the truth about the most important things and the opinion that there is no truth about them. Both of these opinions are fatal to philosophy; the first asserts that the quest for the truth is unnecessary, while the second asserts that it is impossible. The Socratic knowledge of ignorance, which I take to be the beginning point of all philosophy, defines the sensible middle ground between two extremes, the proofs of which demand much more than we know. Pascal's formula about our knowing too little to be dogmatists and too much to be skeptics perfectly describes our human condition as we really experience it, although men have powerful temptations to obscure it and often find it intolerable.

Socrates' way of life is the consequence of his recognition that we can know what it is that we do not know about the most important things and that we are by nature obliged to seek that knowledge. We must remain faithful to the bit of light which pierces through our circumambient darkness.

It is the theoretical life I admire, not some moralism or other, and I seek to defend it against the assaults peculiar to our time. Philosophy, the enemy of illusions and false hopes, is never really popular and is always suspect in the eyes of the supporters of whichever of the extremes happens to dominate. Mr. Schlesinger is an average representative of the relativism which is today's consensus on the Left. However, so eminent and perceptive an observer as Walker Percy, looking from the Right, says that he suspects that I am a nihilist, and he is supported in that view by much less responsible persons from the same quarter. I would respond to him with exactly the same arguments I made to Arthur Schlesinger. This equilibrium of criticism reassures me that I am in the right way, and it confirms my apprehensions about philosophy. It is neither understood nor desired. To the ones it is absolutism, to the others it is relativism; there is no middle; each camp shoves it over into the other. I am now even more persuaded of the urgent need to study why Socrates was accused. The dislike of philosophy is perennial, and the seeds of the condemnation of Socrates are present at all times, not in the bosoms of pleasure seekers, who don't give a damn, but in those of high-minded and idealistic persons who do not want to submit their aspirations to examination. Certainly Socrates is the source of a profound liberalism in relation to which Professor Schlesinger's version of it looks like a parody.

I conclude this digression by remarking that Professor Schlesinger's relativism is not real relativism but a curious mixture of absolutism and relativism typical of our time. Professor Schlesinger is absolutely and unquestioningly committed to democracy and wants to avoid people quibbling about it. He coyly says he does not believe in anything and that good and evil are just preferences, and then he entrusts democracy's fate to a hidden or, rather, a divine hand. I, for my part, doubt that there is any substitute for rational argument for all of its risks and uncertainties. Professor Schlesinger, no stranger to the fabrication of myths or ideologies, appears to be providing one for the tyranny of the majority.

Further, I am also not the leader or member of an educational reform movement, or any movement whatsoever. I respect persons like Sidney Hook who give the best of their energies to fighting threats to academic integrity. But that is not me. I have always been content to hang around the fringes of the intellectual establishment and look in, and am continually surprised that I can support myself that way. To attempt to change things would take me away from my natural activity, would delay gratification now for the sake of unsure futures. I suppose I think the most important thing is to think things through. My book is a statement—as serious as I could make it—about the contemporary situation seen from the perspective of our quest for self-knowledge. Not in my wildest imagination did I think it would appeal to anyone but a few friends and potential friends, a few students and potential students. When it became a hit, the genial American can-do traits surfaced. The prospect I described is publicly unendurable, and I was both criticized for not providing a cure and praised for having prescribed one. Perhaps a public debate about education is a good thing. But I am not a very active participant in it. I suspect that any confrontation with currently stronger forces only precipitates greater defeats for liberal education. Above all, I wish to avoid the self-absorption and corrosion I have seen in others who were principals in *causes célèbres.*

I have gotten a great kick out of becoming the academic equivalent of a rock star. This is partly because the eternal American child in me found it agreeable to experience peculiarly American success from the inside—to find out whether I had been missing anything. But mostly it was because I was afforded a close-up look at the closing of the American mind. I have had to learn, however, to watch out as it slams shut on me.

To the extent I am passionately affected by the spectacle I describe in the book, I feel sorrow or pity for young people whose horizon has become so dark and narrow that, in this enlightened country, it has begun to resemble a cave. Self-consciousness, self-awareness, the Delphic "know thyself" seems to me to be the serious business of education. It is, I know, very difficult even to know what that means, let alone achieve it. But one thing is certain. If one's head is crammed with ideas that were once serious but have become clichés, if one does not even know that these clichés are not as natural as the sun and moon, and if one has no notion that there are alternatives to them, one is doomed to be the puppet of other people's ideas. Only the search back to the origins of one's ideas in order to see the real arguments for them, before people became so certain of them that they ceased thinking about them at all, can liberate us. Our study of history has taught us to laugh at the follies of the whole past, the monarchies, oligarchies, theocracies, and aristocracies with their fanaticism for empire or salvation, once taken so seriously. But we have very few tools for seeing ourselves in the same way, as others will see us. Each age always conspires to make its own way of thinking appear to be the only possible or just way, and our age has the least resistance to the triumph of its own way. There is less real presence of respectable alternatives and less knowledge of the titanic intellectual figures who founded our way. Moreover we are also affected by historicism, which tells us one cannot resist one's way, and relativism, which asks, "What's the use, anyway?" All this has the effect of crippling the natural longing to get out.

In *The Closing of the American Mind* I criticized doctrinaire historicism and relativism as threats to the self-awareness of those who honestly seek it. I pointed to the great sources of those serious ideas which have become dogmas and urged that we turn to serious study of them in order to purge ourselves of our dogmatism. For this I have been violently attacked as nostalgic, ideological, doctrinaire. The meaning is really "Don't touch our belief structure; it hurts." We ought to know, on the basis of historical observation, that what epochs consider their greatest virtue is most often really their greatest temptation, vice, or danger—Roman manliness, Spanish piety, British class, German authenticity. We have to learn to put the scalpel to our virtues. Plato suggests that if you're born in a democracy you are likely to be a relativist. It goes with the territory. Relativism may be true, but, since you are by birthright inclined to it, you especially had better think it over—not for the sake of good morals or good social order, at least in any usual sense of those terms, but for the sake of your freedom and your self-awareness.

Since I first addressed the issue of relativism, I have learned with what moral fervor it is protected and its opposite, ethnocentrism, attacked. This fervor does not propose an investigation but a crusade. The very idea that we ought to look for standards by which to judge ourselves is scandalous. You simply have to believe in the current understanding of openness if you are to believe in democracy and be a decent person.

This openness dogma was epitomized by one intellectual who, unencumbered by acquaintance with my book, ridiculed me for not simply accepting that all cultures are equal. He said that his opinion must be standard equipment for all those who expect to cope with "the century of the Pacific" which is upon us. His formulation set my imagination in motion. I decided it might be interesting to experience a Gulliver's travel to Japan to see whether we really want to set our bark on the great Pacific with a relativist compass and without an "ethnocentric" life jacket. We can weigh anchor at the new, new Stanford, whose slogan is now "Join Stanford and see the world." When we arrive in Japan we shall see a thriving nation. Its success clearly has something to do with its society, which asks much of itself and gets it. It is a real community; its members have roots. Japanese society is often compared to a family. These characteristics are in tune with much of current liberal thought in America. (Remember Governor Cuomo's keynote speech to the Democratic Convention in 1984.)

But the family is exclusive. For in it there is an iron wall separating insiders from outsiders, and its members feel contrary sentiments toward the two. So it is in Japanese society, which is intransigently homogeneous, barring the diversity which is the great pride of the United States today. To put it brutally, the Japanese seem to be racists.

They consider themselves superior; they firmly resist immigration; they exclude even Koreans who have lived for generations among them. They have difficulty restraining cabinet officers from explaining that America's failing economy is due to blacks.

Should we open ourselves up to this new culture? Sympathize with its tastes? Should we aim for restrictiveness rather than diversity? Should we experiment with a more effective racism? All these things could be understood as part of our interest in keeping up with the Japanese economic miracle. Or they could, in a tonier vein, help us in our search for community and roots. We recoil in horror at even having such thoughts. But how can we legitimate our horror? It is only the result of our acculturation, excess baggage brought with us on such voyages of discovery. If there are no transcultural values, our reaction is ethnocentric. And the one thing we know absolutely is that ethnocentrism is bad. So we have painted ourselves into a corner. And it is important to understand this. Those who shrug off such difficulties fail to recognize how important it is to have justice in addition to feeling on our side. Without justice we shall soon succumb to some dangerous temptations and have perhaps already begun to do so.

Many such lessons are to be learned on future voyages to the non-Western world. Discovery requires courage and resoluteness, as Heidegger will teach you. I wonder whether all the *engagé* critics who use his language are aware of what he means when he says that one has to face storms in the ocean of becoming. When little children speak of how bad ethnocentrism is, I know that they have been propagandized. It is too complicated a thing for them to understand. Condemning ethnocentrism is frequently a sign of intellectual, although not necessarily moral, progress. But it is only a first step. To recognize that some of the things our culture believes are not true imposes on us the duty of finding out which are true and which are not, a business altogether more difficult than the wholesale jettisoning of all that one thought one knew. Such jettisoning always ends up with the selective and thoughtless return to old ethnocentric ideas on the basis of what one needs right now, of what pleases one, of pure feeling.[1] But to travel one must spend a little time thinking about one's compass as well as the land one wishes to reach.

This problem has been nicely illustrated these last months by the case of Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*, which insulted the Muslim faith and occasioned the Ayatollah Khomeini's command to have Rushdie killed in England, or wherever he is to be found. There was general shock throughout the Western world at this, and writers, whose ox was being gored, rushed before the TV cameras to denounce this blatant attack on the inviolable principle of freedom of speech. All well and good. But the kicker is that most of these very same writers have for many years been teaching that we must respect the integrity of other cultures and that it is arrogant ethnocentrism to judge other cultures according to our standards, which are themselves merely products of our culture. In this case, however, all such reasonings were forgotten, and freedom of speech was treated as though its claims to transcultural status, its claims to be valid everywhere and always, are true. A few days earlier such claims were treated as instruments of American imperialism; miraculously they were transformed into absolutes. Leaving aside the intellectual incoherence here, this floating means to say we do not know from moment to moment what we will do when there are conflicts, which there inevitably will be, between human rights and the imperatives of the culturally sacred. You may have noticed that there has recently been silence about the case; this is partially because it is an embarrassment, and our convictions are weak. The serious arguments that established the right of freedom of speech were made by philosophers—most notably Locke, Milton, and Mill—and our contemporaries do not return to them to refresh their memories and to see whether the arguments are really good. And this is due not only to laziness but also to the current attack on the very idea of such study.

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[1] Following this lecture, Henry Rosovsky, the legendary dean of Harvard College, exasperated by me, announced that he is a relativist. In the next instant he was complaining that I only look for the bad things in Japan and not the good ones.

The educational project of reforming the mind in the name of openness has gained strength in the last couple of years and is succeeding in changing curricula all over the country. These changes are as great as any of the sixties but not nearly so noticeable because so easily accepted and now apparently so obviously right. From the slogans and the arguments echoed so frequently in the universities and the press one can judge the intentions of the reform and what is at stake. The key word is *canon*. What we are witnessing is the Quarrel of the Canons, the twentieth century's farcical version of the seventeenth century's Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns—the greatest document of which is Swift's *Battle of the Books*. Would that he were here to describe ours as he described theirs! The issue is what food best nourishes the hungers of young souls. "The canon" is the newly valued, demagogically intended, expression for the books taught and read by students at the core of their formal education. But as soon as one adopts the term, as both sides have—foolishly so for those who defend Dante, Shakespeare, and Kant—the nature of the debate has thereby been determined. For canon means what is established by authority, by the powers, hence not by criteria that are rationally defensible. The debate shifts from the content of books to how they become powerful, the motives for which they are used. Canons are, by definition, instruments of domination. They are there to be overthrown, *deconstructed,* in the name of liberation. Those who seek *empowerment* must overcome the prevailing canon, the main source of their enslavement. Curiously books are invested with a very great significance in all this. They are the causes, not mere epiphenomena, as Marxism would have it. Change the books, not the ownership of the means of production, and you change the world: "Readers of the world, you have nothing to lose but your canon." The language is the language of power. "Philosophy is the most spiritualized will to power." That is from Nietzsche, as is, more or less, all the current talk about the canon. "It's all about power," as they say, and in a more metaphysical sense than most know. Philosophy in the past was about knowing; now it is about power. This is the source of the deep drama being played out so frivolously about us. Intellectual life is the struggle of wills to power. Edward Said said at Stanford that the new university reforms were the triumph of postmodernism, meaning, among other things, that the curriculum which taught that the theoretical life is highest has been overcome. Underlying the discussion about non-Western content is a discussion among Westerners using entirely Western categories about the decline or end of the West. The suicide of the West is, by definition, accomplished by Western hands.

The *Times* report of the North Carolina conference gives the flavor of the public discussion: ". . . the conference's participants denounced what they said was a narrow, outdated interpretation of the humanities and of culture itself, one based, they frequently pointed out, on works written by 'dead white European males.' " That is *the* slogan. Above all, the campaign is against Eurocentrism:

> The message of the North Carolina conference was that American society has changed too much for this view to prevail any longer. Blacks, women, Latinos and homosexuals are demanding recognition for their own canons. "Projects like those of Bennett, Hirsch and Bloom all look back to the recovery of the earlier vision of American culture, as opposed to the conception of a kind of ethnic carnival or festival of cultures or ways of life or customs," Professor Fish said.

Replace the old, cold Greek temple with an oriental bazaar. This might be called the Chicago politics model. Overthrow the Waspocracy by means of a Rainbow Coalition. This has more or less plausibility as a political "strategy." Whether it should be the polar star in the formation of young minds is another question. It promises continuing wondrous curricular variations as different specialties and groups vie for power. I would need the pen of Flaubert to characterize it fully. I am grateful to Professor Fish for having described it so candidly.[2]

This is the popular surface of the movement, the publicly acceptable principle of everyone's getting a piece of the action in a nation that has bought into group politics. But there is a deeper, stronger, and more revealing side: "The conference buzzed with code words. When the speakers talked about 'the hegemonic culture,' they meant undemocratic domination by white men. The scholars particularly scorned the idea that certain great works of literature have absolute value or represent some eternal truth. Just about everything, they argued, is an expression of race, class or gender." This is academic jargon, one-third Marxist, two-thirds Nietzschean; but it points toward the metaphysics of the cosmic power struggle in terms of which we interpret everything nowadays. All books have to be reinterpreted to find the conscious or unconscious power motive of their authors. As Nietzsche puts it, "Every philosophy is the author's secret confession."

The other side in this struggle can be found in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois at the turn of the century:

> I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all gra-

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[2] During the question period I discovered that this project has been a roaring success with at least some students. A Chinese, a black, an Armenian, and a person speaking for homosexuals wondered whether they were being "excluded," inasmuch as books by members of their "communities" are not represented in curricula in proportion to their numbers in the population. They seemed to think that Greeks and Italians have been in control of universities and that now their day is coming. One can imagine a census which would redistribute the representation of books. The premise of these students' concerns is that "where you come from," your culture, is more important than where you are going. They are rather like Plato's noble guardian dogs in the *Republic* who love what is familiar, no matter how bad it is, and hate all that is strange or foreign. This kind of demand is entirely new: you do not go to college to discover for yourself what is good but to be confirmed in your origins.

> ciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.[3]

I confess that this view is most congenial to me. Du Bois found our common transcultural humanity not in a canon, but in certain works from which he learned about himself and gained strength for his lonely journey, beyond the Veil. He found community rather than war. He used the books to think about his situation, moving beyond the corrosive of prejudice to the independent and sublime dignity of the fully developed soul. He recapitulates the ever-renewed experience of books by intelligent poor and oppressed people seeking for a way out.

But during the recent Stanford curriculum debate, a leader of the black student group declared that the implicit message of the Western civilization curriculum is "nigger go home." Du Bois from this perspective was suffering from false consciousness, a deceptive faith in theoretical liberation offered by the inventors of practical slavery. *No Exit.*

These opposing quotes truly reflect the meaning of the debate over what is called the canon. The word has religious overtones. *The* Canon is the list of books of the Bible accepted by the Catholic Christian church as genuine and inspired. These books are supposed to compel our faith without reason or evidence. Using a word like canon arouses our passion for liberation from authority. This kind of pseudoreligious characterization of practically everything is epidemic in the post-Nietzschean period. God is dead, and he is the only founder. All kinds of abstract words, like *charisma,* determine our perspective on phenomena before we look at them, and harden the opinion that power is the only thing, in the intellectual arena as well as in the political arena. A canon is regarded as the means of indoctrination used by a ruling elite, and study is the process of entitlement for entry into the elite, for distinguishing the dominators from the dominated. In other words, the priests who teach the canon are empowered by the canon, and they protect their privileged position by their teaching. They establish the canon and are established by it. So you see why a professor like me defends the canon so ferociously.

One can go on weaving these webs of fantasy endlessly, and there is an element of truth in them. Obviously books are used by nations and religions to support their way and to train the young to it. But that is not the whole story. Many books, perhaps the most important ones, have an independent status and bring us light from outside our cave, without which we would be blind. They are frequently the acid which reveals the outlines of abusive power. This is especially true in a liberal society like our own, where it is hard to find a "canonical" book which truly supports our way unqualifiedly. It is at least as plausible that the books which have a continuing good reputation and used to be read in colleges have made it on their intrinsic merits. To be sure, traditions tend to ossify and also to aggregate superfluous matters, to be taught authoritatively by tiresome persons who don't know why they are important and who hold their jobs because they are virtuosos of trivia. But this only means that the traditions have to be renewed from time to time and the professors made to give an account of themselves.

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[3] W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1969), p. 139.

One of the most obvious cases of a writer used as an authority to bolster what might be called a structure of power is Aristotle during the Christian Middle Ages. Scholasticism was a stifling force which had to be rebelled against in order to free the mind. But to take that Will Durant–like interpretation as exhaustive would be naïve. In the first place, Aristotle is something on his own. He survived the wreckage of Scholasticism quite nicely and needed no power structure prior to that time or afterward to insure the continuing interest enlightened men and women take in his works. Moreover, Aristotle's accession to power was a result of a revolution in Christianity which rationalized it and made it move a long way from revelation toward reason. It was the explosion of Greek philosophy into Christian Europe. That philosophy had been preserved and renewed among the Muslims. The challenge of reason presented by the Muslim philosophers precipitated a crisis in Christianity that was appeased but not entirely resolved by Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle sat among the Christian sages, but he inspired many to turn against them. Here we have a truly interesting case of the relation between the allegedly Western and the allegedly non-Western. Such cases speak against the canonical thesis rather than for it and are covered over by it.

It is a grave error to accept that the books of the dead white Western male canon are essentially Western—or any of those other things. The fact that I am doubtful about the non-Western craze suggests automatically, even to sympathetic critics, that I am promoting Western Civ or the like. Yet the very language used shows how enslaved we have become to the historicist assertion that all thought is decisively culture-bound. When Averroës and Thomas Aquinas read Aristotle they did not think of him as Greek and put him into his historical context. They had no interest in Greek Civ but treated him as a wise man, hence a contemporary at all times.

We smile at this naïveté, but they understood Aristotle better than do our scholars, as one can see simply by perusing the commentaries. Plato and Kant claim that they speak to all men everywhere and forever, and I see no reason to reject those claims *a priori.* But that is precisely what is done when they are taken to be parts of Western Civ. To the extent they are merely that, the appeals against them are justified, for Western Civ is clearly partial, demanding the supplement of all the other Civs. The strength of these appeals is in their demand for wholeness or completeness of understanding. Therefore, to begin with, historicism, the alleged primacy of culture, has to be called into question, though it is one of those opinions that has so completely captured modern minds that it appears indubitable. The quarrel is *not* about Western and non-Western but about the possibility of philosophy. The real issue is being obscured due to a political dispute. If we give in we shall allow very modern philosophy to swallow up all philosophers from Socrates up to and including Marx. Postmodernism is an attempt to annihilate the inspiration of Greek philosophy that is more effective than that of the barbarians with their Dark Ages after the fall of Rome, more effective because it is being accomplished by the force and the guile of philosophy itself. I am not asserting the truth of philosophy's old claim to break through the limits of culture and history, but I am asserting that it is the only question. It is neither a Western nor a non-Western question.

Nobody, or practically nobody, argues that natural science is essentially Western. Some efforts have been made in that direction, just as some feminists have tried to show that science is essentially male, but these efforts, aside from their admirable sense of the need for theoretical consistency, have not proved persuasive. There is that big rock of transcultural knowledge or truth, natural science, standing amidst us while we chatter on about the cultural basis of all knowledge. A serious non-Western putsch would require that students learn fifty percent non-Western math, fifty percent non-Western physics, fifty percent non-Western biology, and so forth for medicine and engineering. The reformers stop there because they know they would smack up against a brick wall and discredit their whole movement. Philosophy, they say, is not like that. Perhaps, but I have yet to see a serious discussion about wherein it differs. Differ it does today. But qualitatively? That question ought to keep us busy for a long time. Science is surely somehow transcultural. Religion seems pretty much limited to cultures, even to define them. Is philosophy like science, or is it like religion? What we are witnessing is an attempt to drag it away definitively to the camp of religion.

The universities have dealt with this problem by ceding the despised historicized humanities to the political activists and extremists, leaving undisturbed their nonhistoricized disciplines, which is where the meat and the money are. It is a windfall for administrators to be able to turn all the affirmative-action complaints over to the humanities, which act as a lightning rod while their ship continues its stately progress over undisturbed waters. Stanford shows its concerned, humane, radical face to its inner community, and its serious technical face to the outside community, particularly to its donors. The humanities radicals will settle for this on the calculation that if they can control the minds of the young, they will ultimately gain political control over the power of science.

The essential liberating texts have survived because they are useful. When I spoke of democracy and relativism in *The Closing of the American Mind,* I said only what I learned from Plato and a few others. I appreciate and need further information. So do we all. The serious scholars in non-Western thought should bring us the powerful *texts* they know of to help us. The true canon aggregates around the most urgent questions we face. That is the only ground for the study of books. Idle cultural reports, Eastern or Western, cannot truly concern us, except as a hobby. Edgar Z. Friedenberg once said that social scientists are always giving themselves hernias trying to see something about America Tocqueville did not see. That is why we need Tocqueville, and our neglecting to read him can be interpreted as an effort at hernia prevention. Nietzsche did not seek out Socrates because he was part of the classical canon German boys learned in school. He did so in spite of that fact. Socrates was necessary to him as the profoundest statement of what philosophy is and as the worthiest of rivals. Machiavelli was impelled by real need, not by conformism, when he sought out Xenophon. Male, female, black, white, Greek, barbarian: that was all indifferent, as it should be. Nietzsche reflected on Buddha when he wanted to test the principle of contradiction. That is a model of the way things should be. The last thing we need is a sort of philosophic U.N. run by bureaucrats for the sake of representation for all peoples.

Each must ultimately judge for himself about the important books, but a good beginning would be to see what other thinkers the thinkers who attract him turn to. That will quickly lead to the top. There are very few who remain there, and they recognize one another. There is no conspiracy, only the desire to know. If we allow ourselves to be seduced by the plausible theses of our day, and turn our backs on the great dialogue, our loss will be irreparable.

In my book I connected this radical historicism with fascism and asserted that the thinking of the European Right had wandered over to the Left in America. This earned me severe and unthinking criticism (with the honorable exception of Richard Rorty). It seems to such critics that I am one of those persons who trivialize unique and terrible phenomena by calling anyone whom I don't like a fascist or a Nazi. But I did not call persons active in the sixties those names. I said that the language of the New Left was no longer truly Marxist and had become imbued with the language of fascism. And anyone with an ear for the speech of intellectuals in Weimar Germany will hear echoes all around us of the dangerous ideas to which they became accustomed. Since the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind,* fortuitously there has been fresh attention paid to the Nazism of Martin Heidegger, more and more widely recognized as the most intelligent figure contributing to the postmodernist movement. At the same time Paul de Man, who introduced deconstructionism into the United States, was revealed to have written, as a young man, pro-Nazi articles for a collaborationist Belgian newspaper. In reading these articles I was struck by the fact that if one suppresses the references to Hitler and Hitlerism, much of it sounds like what one reads in advanced literary reviews today. The lively debate around these questions has not been very helpful, for it focuses more on questions of personal guilt than on the possible relation of their thought to the foulest political extremism. The fact that de Man had become a Leftist doesn't prove a thing. He never seems to have passed through a stage where he was attracted by reason or liberal democracy. Those who chose culture over civilization, the real opposition, which we have forgotten, were forced to a position beyond good and evil, for good and evil are products of cultures. The really great thinkers who thought through what the turn to culture means, starting from power, said that immoderation, violence, blood, and soil are its means. These are the consequence of the will to power. I am inclined to take the views of men of such stature seriously. Very few of America's end-of-the-West people are attracted by these aspects of the problem of culture, although there are some, I suspect, who do experience a terrible frisson of joy when they hear them. However that may be, one always ends up by paying a price for the consequences of what one thinks.

This is how the American intellectual scene looks. Much greater events occurring outside the United States, however, demonstrate the urgency of our task. Those events are epitomized by the Statue of Liberty erected by the Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. Apparently, after some discussion about whether it should be altered to have Chinese rather than *Eurocentric* features, there was a consensus that it did not make any difference.

The terror in China continues, and we cannot yet know what will become of those courageous young persons. But we do know the justice of their cause; and although there is no assurance that it will ultimately triumph, their oppressors have won the universal execration of mankind. With Marxist ideology a wretched shambles everywhere, nobody believes any longer in communist legitimacy. Everywhere in the communist world what is wanted is rational liberal democracy that recognizes men's natural freedom and equality and the rights dependent on them. The people of that world need and want education in democracy and the institutions that actualize it. That education is one of the greatest services the democracies can offer to the people who live under communist tyrannies and long for liberty. The example of the United States is what has impressed them most, and their rulers have been unable to stem the infection. Our example, though, requires explanations, the kind the Founders gave to the world. And this is where we are failing: the dominant schools in American universities can tell the Chinese students only that they should avoid Eurocentrism, that rationalism has failed, that they should study non-Western cultures, and that *bourgeois* liberalism is the most despicable of regimes. Stanford has replaced John Locke, *the* philosopher of liberalism, with Frantz Fanon, an ephemeral writer once promoted by Sartre because of his murderous hatred of Europeans and his espousal of terrorism. However, this is not what the Chinese need. They have Deng Xiaoping to deconstruct their Statue of Liberty. We owe them something much better.

It is in this atmosphere, the awareness that we tread near the edge of the abyss, that I think and write. The American intellectual scene is bleak and ominous but certainly provides great theoretical exhilaration, if one can bear to observe it closely.